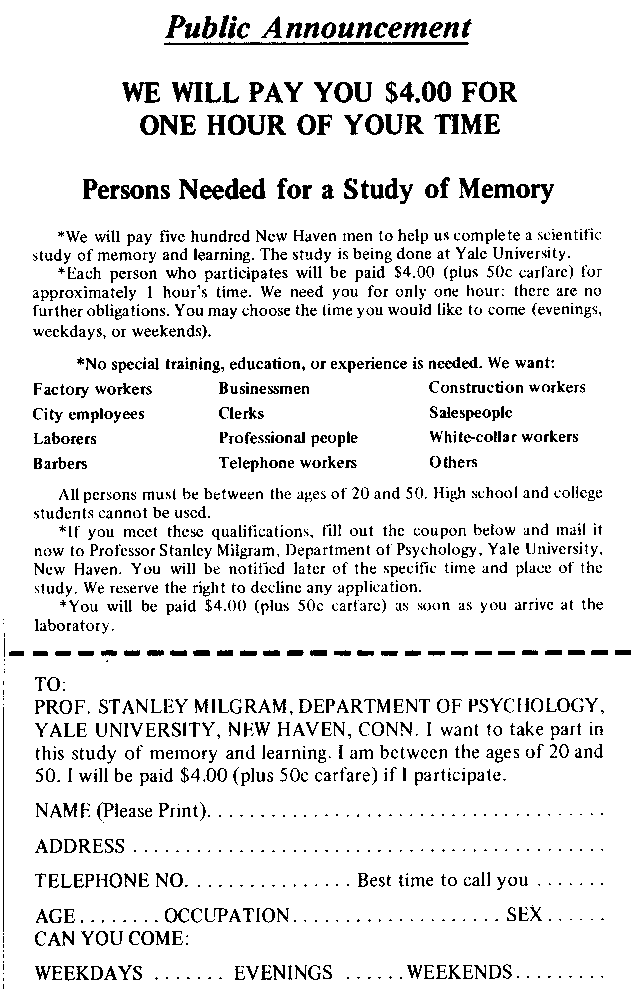
**THE MILGRAM EXPERIMENT: A LESSON IN DEPRAVITY**

The **Milgram experiment** was a series of [social psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_psychology) [experiments](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experiment) conducted by [Yale University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yale_University) [psychologist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology) [Stanley Milgram](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Milgram), which measured the willingness of study participants to [obey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obedience_(human_behavior)) an [authority figure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authority) who instructed them to perform acts that conflicted with their personal [conscience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscience).The experiments began in July 1961, three months after the start of the trial of [Nazi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi) [war criminal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_criminal) [Adolf Eichmann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Eichmann) in [Jerusalem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem). Milgram devised the experiments to answer this question: "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in [the Holocaust](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust) were just following orders? Could we call them all [accomplices](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accomplice)?"

Milgram summarized the experiment in his 1974 article, "The Perils of Obedience", writing: The legal and philosophic aspects of [obedience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obedience) are of enormous importance, but they say very little about how most people behave in concrete situations. I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much [pain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pain) an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' [participants'] ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation. Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Milgram_Experiment_advertising.gif)

**Milgram Experiment advertisement**

## The Experiment

Three people take part in the experiment: "experimenter", "learner" ("victim") and "teacher" (participant). Only the "teacher" is an actual participant, i.e. unaware about the actual setup, while the "learner" is a [confederate](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/confederate) of the experimenter. The role of the experimenter was played by a stern, impassive biology teacher dressed in a grey technician's coat, and the victim (learner) was played by a 47 year old Irish-American accountant trained to act for the role. The participant and the learner were told by the experimenter that they would be participating in an experiment helping his study of memory and learning in different situations.

Two slips of paper were then presented to the participant and to the "learner". The participant was led to believe that one of the slips said "learner" and the other said "teacher," and that he and the actor had been given the slips randomly. In fact, both slips said "teacher," but the actor claimed to have the slip that read "learner," thus guaranteeing that the participant would always be the "teacher." At this point, the "teacher" and "learner" were separated into different rooms where they could communicate but not see each other. In one version of the experiment, the confederate was sure to mention to the participant that he had a [heart condition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heart_condition).

The "teacher" was given an [electric shock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electric_shock) from the electro-shock generator as a sample of the shock that the "learner" would supposedly receive during the experiment. The "teacher" was then given a list of word pairs which he was to teach the learner. The teacher began by reading the list of word pairs to the learner. The teacher would then read the first word of each pair and read four possible answers. The learner would press a button to indicate his response. If the answer was incorrect, the teacher would administer a shock to the learner, with the voltage increasing in 15-[volt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volt) increments for each wrong answer. If correct, the teacher would read the next word pair.

The subjects believed that for each wrong answer, the learner was receiving actual shocks. In reality, there were no shocks. After the confederate was separated from the subject, the confederate set up a tape recorder integrated with the electro-shock generator, which played pre-recorded sounds for each shock level. After a number of voltage level increases, the actor started to bang on the wall that separated him from the subject. After several times banging on the wall and complaining about his heart condition, all responses by the learner would cease.

At this point, many people indicated their desire to stop the experiment and check on the learner. Some test subjects paused at 135 volts and began to question the purpose of the experiment. Most continued after being assured that they would not be held responsible. A few subjects began to laugh nervously or exhibit other signs of extreme stress once they heard the screams of pain coming from the learner.

If at any time the subject indicated his desire to halt the experiment, he was given a succession of verbal prods by the experimenter, in this order:

1. Please continue.
2. The experiment requires that you continue.
3. It is absolutely essential that you continue.
4. You have no other choice, you *must* go on.

If the subject still wished to stop after all four successive verbal prods, the experiment was halted. Otherwise, it was halted after the subject had given the maximum 450-volt shock three times in succession. This experiment could be seen to raise some [ethical issues](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_issues) as Stanley Milgram deceived his study's subjects, and put them under more pressure than many believe was necessary.

## Results

Before conducting the experiment, Milgram polled fourteen Yale University senior-year psychology majors as to what they thought would be the results. All of the poll respondents believed that only a few (average 1.2%) would be prepared to inflict the maximum voltage. Milgram also informally polled his colleagues and found that they, too, believed very few subjects would progress beyond a very strong shock.

In Milgram's first set of experiments, 65 percent (26 of 40) of experiment participants administered the experiment's final 450-volt shock, though many were very uncomfortable doing so; at some point, every participant paused and questioned the experiment, some said they would refund the money they were paid for participating in the experiment. Only one participant steadfastly refused to administer shocks *before* the 300-volt level.[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment#cite_note-ObedStudy-0#cite_note-ObedStudy-0)

Later, Prof. Milgram and other psychologists performed variations of the experiment throughout the world, with similar results although unlike the Yale experiment, resistance to the experimenter was reported anecdotally elsewhere.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment#cite_note-5#cite_note-5) Milgram later investigated the effect of the experiment's locale on obedience levels by holding an experiment in an unregistered, backstreet office in a bustling city, as opposed to at Yale, a respectable university. The level of obedience, "although somewhat reduced, was not significantly lower". What made more of a difference was the proximity of the "learner" and the experimenter. There were also variations tested involving groups.

Dr. Thomas Blass of the [University of Maryland, Baltimore County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Maryland,_Baltimore_County) performed a [meta-analysis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meta-analysis) on the results of repeated performances of the experiment. He found that the percentage of participants who are prepared to inflict fatal voltages remains remarkably constant, 61–66 percent, regardless of time or place.

There is a little-known [coda](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/coda) to the Milgram Experiment, reported by [Philip Zimbardo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Zimbardo): none of the participants who refused to administer the final shocks insisted that the experiment itself be terminated, nor left the room to check the health of the victim without requesting permission to leave, as per Milgram's notes and recollections, when Zimbardo asked him about that point.

Milgram created a documentary film titled *Obedience* showing the experiment and its results. He also produced a series of five social psychology films, some of which dealt with his experiments.

The Milgram Experiment raised questions about the [ethics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethics) of scientific experimentation because of the extreme emotional stress suffered by the participants. In Milgram's defense, 84 percent of former participants surveyed later said they were "glad" or "very glad" to have participated, 15 percent chose neutral responses (92% of all former participants responding).[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment#cite_note-9#cite_note-9) Many later wrote expressing thanks. Milgram repeatedly received offers of assistance and requests to join his staff from former participants. Six years later (at the height of the [Vietnam War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War)), one of the participants in the experiment sent correspondence to Milgram, explaining why he was glad to have participated despite the stress:

While I was a subject in 1964, though I believed that I was hurting someone, I was totally unaware of why I was doing so. Few people ever realize when they are acting according to their own beliefs and when they are meekly submitting to authority… To permit myself to be [drafted](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscription_in_the_United_States) with the understanding that I am submitting to authority's demand to do something very wrong would make me frightened of myself… I am fully prepared to go to jail if I am not granted [Conscientious Objector](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscientious_Objector) status. Indeed, it is the only course I could take to be faithful to what I believe. My only hope is that members of my board act equally according to their conscience…

The experiments provoked emotional criticism more about the experiment's implications than with experimental ethics. In the journal [Jewish Currents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Currents), Joseph Dimow, a participant in the 1961 experiment at Yale University, wrote about his early withdrawal as a "teacher", suspicious "that the whole experiment was designed to see if ordinary Americans would obey immoral orders, as many Germans had done during the Nazi period".[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment#cite_note-10#cite_note-10) Indeed, that was one of the explicitly-stated goals of the experiments. Quoting from the preface of Milgram's book, *Obedience to Authority*: "The question arises as to whether there is any connection between what we have studied in the laboratory and the forms of obedience we so deplored in the Nazi epoch".

In 1981, [Tom Peters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Peters) and [Robert H. Waterman Jr](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_H._Waterman_Jr) wrote that The Milgram Experiment and the later [Stanford prison experiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_prison_experiment) led by Zimbardo at Stanford University were frightening in their implications about the danger lurking in human nature's dark side.[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment#cite_note-11#cite_note-11)

**Interpretations**

Professor Milgram elaborated two theories explaining his results:

* The first is the *theory of conformism*, based on [Solomon Asch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon_Asch)'s work, describing the fundamental relationship between the group of reference and the individual person. A subject who has neither ability nor expertise to make decisions, especially in a crisis, will leave decision making to the group and its hierarchy. The group is the person's behavioral model.
* The second is the *agentic state theory*, wherein, per Milgram, *the essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer sees himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all of the essential features of obedience follow*.

**Questions:**

1. **Based on Milgram’s notes, what did the Milgram experiment aim to study?**
2. **What did the advertisement for volunteers for the study state was the focus of the experiment?**
3. **Describe the method (steps) involved in the study. Be sure to include information identifying and describing the various roles in the experiment.**
4. **Summarize the results of the study in detail.**
5. **Why do you think there are ethical concerns regarding such a study?**